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VISTA: Parents upset about plan to merge two schools

District officials meet with community at Olive to discuss proposal

By STACY BRANDT - sbrandt@nctimes.com | Posted: Monday, November 16, 2009 9:40 pm

More than 200 parents crowded into the cafeteria at Olive Elementary School on Monday evening to let Vista Unified School District officials know what they thought of plans to merge the school with Washington Middle School.

The parents were overwhelmingly against the proposal, which calls for combining the schools next fall and turning the Washington campus into a school for children from preschool to eighth grade.

"Find other ways to cut the money," said Ericka Morales, president of Olive's advisory committee for students learning to speak English. "Closing the school should be the last resort."

Donna Caperton, assistant superintendent in charge of business services, addressed the crowd and answered most of their questions. Because it's so early in the planning process, she said, there are still many unknowns.

"This is the first step in the process to improve communication," she said. "I'm here tonight to begin a dialogue."

Parents angrily questioned the district's motives in proposing the change and said they didn't like the idea of having young children sharing a campus with teens. Others said they were worried about the district's plan to use the Olive campus for adult education.

Many waved signs with messages in English and Spanish such as "Don't close Olive" and "Olive = good; merge = bad."

Some parents circulated a petition asking the school board to keep Olive at its current location, next door to Washington in central Vista. They said they plan to rally parents to attend the board meeting Thursday, when trustees will decide whether to move forward on the plan.

Under the proposal, Washington would begin serving elementary and middle school students starting in the next school year. The district's adult education program would take the Olive campus and give the existing adult-education facility ----- across the street from Vista High School ---- to Palomar High School, the district's independent study program. This would allow the program to grow and merge with the district's home-school program to form a kindergarten-through-12th-grade program.

The move could save the district as much as \$500,000 a year because of lower operating and staffing costs.

It would also give educators a chance to reinvent the school. It could become a magnet campus or begin offering programs that other schools don't, said Mike Marcos, the principal at Washington.

"It certainly gives us an opportunity to have a focus or a niche," he said. "It really allows us to offer something unique."

Whatever happens, educators at Olive and Washington will continue to focus on English and math, Deputy Superintendent Sandy Gecewicz said.

What the school will look like academically will be discussed at meetings the district is planning with educators and community members over the next couple of months.

In less than a decade, enrollment at Washington and Olive has dropped from a combined 2,600 students to fewer than 1,100. The change has been largely fueled by federal laws that went into effect in 2002, allowing parents to transfer their children out of schools with low test scores.

A committee of community members, educators and parents developed the proposal over the past several months and plans to present it at the next school board meeting at 7 p.m. Nov. 19 at Foothill Oak Elementary School, 1370 Oak Drive.

The trustees won't vote on the proposal then, but they will let administrators know whether they want school officials to continue looking into the possibility.. The plan probably will come back to the board in February for a final vote, officials said.

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